

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today expressed concern that the government of Azerbaijan is violating its international obligations regarding respect for freedom of religion or belief along with other fundamental human rights, such as freedom of assembly and access to information.

“USCIRF has monitored the deteriorating situation in Azerbaijan for five years and recent developments are troubling,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. “We call on the United States Government and the international community to hold the Azeri leadership to its international human rights obligations on freedom of religion or belief.”

Amendments to the Azeri religion law, which were hurriedly passed last spring, have negatively affected many religious communities, particularly the country’s majority Muslim community and evangelical Protestant groups. For example, the new legislation restricts religious activity only to the place where the particular community is legally registered, in violation of international law. In addition, some religious groups told USCIRF staff in December 2009 that the new registration process is excessively cumbersome and more restrictive than before. Due to bureaucratic hurdles, many religious communities have not been registered by the January 1, 2010 deadline and now face liquidation as legal entities.

Mr. Leo called on the Azeri government to submit its laws to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief for analysis, and to fully implement the panel’s findings.

Despite Baku being named one of four Capitals of Islamic Culture in 2009, since August 2008 the Azeri government has destroyed or closed many mosques, particularly in Baku. The Abu-Bekr mosque in Baku was closed in August 2008 after a grenade attack, and officials have refused to reopen it, despite numerous community efforts. Baku’s Prophet Muhammad mosque was demolished in April 2009 after officials claimed it had been built illegally. A mosque on the Oily Rocks island in the Caspian Sea was demolished in May 2009 after state officials claimed it was unsafe. Worshippers dispute that claim. A Sunni mosque in central Baku was closed for restoration in May 2009 and city officials closed another Sunni mosque in the city of Gyanja in September 2009. Officials closed Baku’s Fatima Zahra mosque in June, generating dozens of protests. The country’s court system has ignored legal suits brought by the communities of two of the closed mosques, and government has ignored protests over mosque closures and demolitions from the semi-official Caucasus Muslim Board.

Mosque destruction is not the only repression the Muslims in Azerbaijan endure. Three groups who study the Muslim tradition of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi have been raided by

police in various areas of Azerbaijan in early 2010, Forum 18 reported. In December 2009, state employees and students in the Nakhchivan village of Bananyar were officially discouraged from attending Shia Ashura observations, which commemorate the death of Muhammad's grandson. After 2000 people marked Ashura in the village of Bananyar, authorities detained and interrogated dozens, and some reported physical abuse. Several villagers were also sent to a psychiatric hospital, as was done during the Soviet period.

The Azeri authorities attempted to censor all news from Bananyar, and the Nakhchivan interior minister threatened villagers with arrest if they talked to outsiders, according to press reports. American and Norwegian diplomats traveled to Bananyar on January 13, to investigate the situation, but were prevented from entering the village. On January 14, the American and Norwegian embassies issued a joint statement calling upon the Azeri government "to fully investigate the incidents in Bananyar and to provide protection to foreign diplomats working in Azerbaijan." Not only did the Azeri government reject the diplomatic protest, but decorated the chairman of Nakhchivan's local parliament with the country's highest order, according to Azeri press reports.

"USCIRF calls upon the Azeri government to permit an international investigation, including by the OSCE, into the Bananyar situation," said Mr. Leo.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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